<u>Covenant Network</u> 11/9/06

A little history might be a good place to begin. Although my adult children would warn, “Don’t ever ask Dad a question about history, unless you have a lot of time on your hands, because he always begins with the Roman Empire and works his way up to the Second World War.” I suppose it does begin with Rome and the advent of a new movement in the early years of the Common Era: in fact it was the movement that ultimately divides the Common Era from the time before it. The history I mean is just a decade old in our relatively small part of the larger movement, the Presbyterian Church in the USA part.

It was just ten years ago, 1996, that a General Assembly of our Church, meeting in Albuquerque, approved an amendment to our Book of Order, Form of Government, Chapter 6, The Church and Its Officers, section 6.0106: the Amendment's official designation was G-60106b:

> **"Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scriptures and in conformity to the historic standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to love either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing**

to repent if any self-acknowledged practice which the Confessions call sin shall not be ordained/or installed as deacons, elders or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."

In retrospect I see now that it was a very carefully planned event. We had been talking about human sexuality since the 1970's, and much of the debate, the most difficult and controversial part, had to do with homosexuality. In fact I recall how it happened here — in this congregation, in 1978. We had an adult education event, in traditional Presbyterian style. There were three ministers on the staff and we represented three different positions. Gerry Gregg, my great friend

and trusted colleague — advocated the progressive position — (and in the course of our conversation privately told me that his brother, John, a very distinguished minister, was gay), Arthur Roning, a beloved pastor, former missionary to China, POW — held by the Japanese during World War II, a pastor, Presbytery executive — had settled in Columbus and agreed to come on the staff here. Art was a survivor of the fundamentalist/modernist wars at Princeton a generation before. One of his classmates was Karl McIntire. Art was a sweet man — but he could not get his mind around the topic of homosexuality so he took the more conservative position. We were friends until he died and before he died Art told me he had made a mistake and h ad

concluded that full inclusion of all God's children was the only faithful position. I was the pastor and, surprise, I took a position between my colleagues, something akin to "Don't ask, don't tell," a position I have never quite discarded. I do not mean to be dismissive but as my mother told me years ago when I kept asking her with great persistence why my cousin's name was not the same as his mother and whose father was not only not around, but his name was never mentioned — "Johnny: there are some things you don't need to know." I think about that every time a good Presbyterian man or woman makes an appointment and I discover the purpose of the conversation is to tell me that she is a lesbian/he is gay. I'm honored to be

trusted: I'm honored that in spite of what churches, including our own, say about them, they want me to know. And I am always tempted to say: "I don't need to know this. In fact, I don't want to know this. Mother said, 'There are some things you don't need to know' and I have an idea this is one of them." Besides in more than four decades of ministry no one has yet made an appointment, sat down in my study and said: "Reverend, I need you to know that I am a heterosexual."

I know it's not the same — but long ago I was in the middle and find the middle the place where I frequently belong, which often means an irritant to people on the right and the left.

What I recall most clearly about those early conversations in this church was that several people came to me expressing gratitude that we were talking about it, because they had a son, or a daughter, or a grandson or granddaughter who was gay — and alienated by a church that didn't seem to want them let alone accept them. One in particular I remember: well-to-do, absolutely proper: she and her husband members of Columbus's finest clubs: both officers in the church. She came to me — not happy. "My son is gay" — she said. "There, I said it. Almost no one knows — but now you do, and I want you to get busy and get this church back on track. If he's not acceptable here, neither am I."

Back to 1996 and Albuquerque. Now you know why my children don't ask questions.

It was a carefully planned strategy by Presbyterians, many good friends of mine — many involved in a new organization called The Presbyterian Coalition. And it united. The Assembly debated and adopted G-6.0106b, and sent it to the Presbyteries.

That Assembly, the 208th, had earlier, for some reason that continues to be a mystery, elected me as its Moderator. And so it was my duty to preside over the discussion and the vote: to be as neutral as possible although everyone knew where my sympathies lay. When the vote was

taken, a large group of people who had come to the Assembly from all over the country, to pray and advocate and hope for a more inclusive and generous church, assembled outside. They had asked for permission to walk silently through the Assembly as an act of public witness, should the vote go the other way. I gave them permission — in consultation with the Stated Clerk. It was not a universally popular decision. But it was an unforgettably powerful moment. In they came by the tens, by the hundreds. Gay and Lesbian Presbyterians, some of them self-identifying for the first time — risking vocation and future: friends, supporters, parents and grandparents — that always gets to me — the parents and grandparents of wonderful children and

grandchildren, excluded and condemned by the church they have loved and served faithfully all their lives.

A number of members of my congregation were there: one of whom as my wife: another a gay man who was an Elder, Trustee — a long-time devoted leader: another as a young man who had come to us from a congregation in Chicago that had told him he was not welcome. His name was Glen. He had AIDS. Both of them are gone now. Sue, I recall, walked between them.

So it began. For the next 12 months the Presbyteries debated and voted and ultimately a majority approved the amendment. I visited 52 of them: heard the debates, made my

speech asking the church to make space, to respect diversity, and trust Sessions and Presbyteries to make faithful decisions.

The amendment was approved. The next Assembly, in Syracuse, however, changed the amendment in a significant and, I thought, good way. And once again sent it to the Presbyteries — now more the meaning of the discussion, but more the meaning of the deepening conflict in our church. This time it lost by a significant margin.

The Covenant Network of Presbyterians was born early in that year. Bob Bohl, Ge___ B___, Barbara Wheeler, Joanna Adams, Cynthia Campbell, Tim Hart-Anderson, John

Wilkinson, Doug Olderling — joined me in an effort to recover something of the grace and respect for diversity and difference, not to mention privacy, that characterized the Presbyterian Church we loved and had called us to ministry and which seemed to be disappearing before our very eyes.

At the Albuquerque Assembly, the Stated Clerk, James Andrews, completed his term of office and so it was my great honor to preside over the election that brought Cliff Kirkpatrick to this office — maybe the best action the Assembly took. Along the way, Jim Andrews and I became food friends. He came to see me occasionally. I suppose I was one of the ones he chose to be is pastor. After the formation and initial meeting of the

Covenant Network, Jim wrote to me. He said he certainly understood the feelings of those like me who had created the new organization. He said: "I hope you will dissolve it as soon as this year is over." He said, "I hope you will reinvest yourselves in the PC(USA). The whole church needs the leadership and wisdom of the leaders of the Covenant Network."

I confess I've thought about Jim's words a lot. I believe deeply in what this organization represents. I believe deeply in its purpose, its objectives, its style of being Presbyterian, its clear commitment to values that are essential to the Reformed Tradition and very, very precious. I believe its voice needs to be heard, now more than ever. But

I'm also clear that it is the PC(USA) that we are about. That the PC(USA) is our priority affinity group and that it is the PC(USA) that is in trouble these days and which needs all the love, prayers, hard work and support we can give it.

Moderator Joan Gray put into words what a lot of people are asking these days: "Do we really need a denomination?" The Moderator thinks we do and so do I but if there is clarity about anything it is that we are in the middle of vast changes — changes in the way people think about religion and church, politics, ethics, demographic changes, geographic changes. There are plenty of ways to define and analyze it and I don't need to add to the unending river of words written about

it. Michael Jinkins, Academic Dean at Austin Seminary, says that the mainline churches are lamenting the loss of a "mythical Golden Age," doing a lot of whimpering, trembling and blaming these days. "And the only thing that appears to be growing in mainline Protestantism is the literature on its decline" (*Stewards of the Future of God's Church*, p. 2).

In her new book, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes about her decision to leave parish ministry and day-to-day involvement in the institutional church, in order to teach and write. "All these years later" she writes, "the way many of us all doing church is broken and we know it, even if we do not know what to do about it."

I returned to the town in Western Pennsylvania where I grew up recently to attend a High School Reunion, a thriving, bustling Railroad town in the 1950s with thriving Presbyterian Churches: First Presbyterian — actually there were two Firsts: a First United and a First, Second Presbyterian, Third Presbyterian, Ward Avenue Presbyterian, Junction Presbyterian, Broad Avenue — my church. Seven thriving congregations. I don't know the statistics — but they were all doing well, had full-time pastors, youth groups, — even a Presbyterian basketball league that played its games in the Gym of First Church — where the bankers and doctors and PRR Executives belonged.

Fifty years later there is no PRR, the city has lost half its population: the downtown is deserted. Some of the Presbyterian Churches are closed, others are struggling. First and Broad Avenue are in the process of uniting to create one new congregation. There are no railroad executives, the doctors in town now do not have Anglo-Saxon names. Over the years as I visited and talked to pastors — there was a lot of blaming — blaming, of all things, the denomination — for number loss. The pastor of my old church had to be forced to invite me to preach when I was Moderator — and after I preached sent a letter to the congregation correcting my theology and insinuating that what ailed the Presbyterian Church was liberals

like me, never mentioning the fact that there was no Railroad, no industry, no jobs and half the people there used to be _____half the Presbyterians.

We are an old and traditional church trying to live in a world that is changing in front of our eyes and instead of trying to figure out how to keep up — we've decided to invest our energies blaming someone.

Frederick Buechner writes about how modestly it all began:

> **The church buildings and budgets came later. The form of church government, the priests and pastors, Baptists and Protestants. The Sunday**

services with everybody in their best clothes — all came later, as did the Bible study groups and rummage sales and TV preachers . . . They all came later. Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all always — the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place" (*Secrets in*

***the Dark*, "*The Church*", p. 153).**

Sometimes that feels like what is happening to us. But there is another angle of vision. We are still a strong church, in spite of the changes happening in and around us. There are still more than 2 million of us and 11,000 congregations the vast majority of which are not fighting or arguing or threatening to quit, but carrying on faithfully. There are still all those mission partners, all those churches around the globe that were started by our missionaries and still look to us with affection and gratitude.

We are not the church we were in the 1950s with our corporate

style headquarters in Manhattan, our Executives striding across the stage of the church with strength, confidence, authority, our Stated Clerk on the cover of *Time* magazine. And we never will be again. That is gone — all of it — and our responsibility — our mission is to try to find a way to be a faithful Presbyterian Church in a new unfolding future.

For one thing this Covenant Network needs to acknowledge with clarity and honesty — that we are in a new place and to act accordingly.

Poet and novelist Wendell Berry is one of the wisest people I know. He is a believer who goes to

church some Sundays with his wife in their rural Kentucky town. Tanya, his wife, is a leader in the dissenting, moderate wing of the South Baptist Convention. Wendell attends, like the brave young preachers mostly, but steps back a little, occasionally electing to take a walk through the hills and woods on Sunday morning, and returning home to write a wonderful Sabbath poem.

Berry is a strong and vocal advocate for the environment and takes strong positions and says strong things about heavy industry, agribusiness, and government — which he believes are in an unholy

alliance to destroy the air, water and earth.

In a speech he made to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2004, he said some things that are remarkably relevant to us and to the place we find ourselves in today. It's in his new book of essays, *The Way of Ignorance* (p. 74):

> **Even a great redemptive effort, under way nearly everywhere and supported by the good work of many people, when it is as scattered and disconnected as this one, is almost inevitably going to be mostly negative. Among the**

many organizations I am taking about, the ost popular words, after “save,” are “stop,” and “no.” Even the preservation of something of value is negative if it reduces the possibility of preserving something else of value.

It is, of course, perfectly all right to be against something that is wrong. If we see that something is wrong we have no choice but to oppose it — for the sake, if for nothing else, of our own world. And yet, in so destructive an age as ours, it is possible for our sense of wrong to become an affliction. All of us who are committed to

saving things of value have been in what Wes Jackson calls "the ain't-it-awful conversation," in which we recite the current litany of outrages. We have been in that conversation, and, if we have brought it to a modicum of sanity, we have recognized sooner or later the need to get out of it. The logical end of the ain't-it-awful conversation, as of the life devoted merely to opposition, is despair. People quit having any fun, they begin to talk about the "inevitability" of what they are against, and they give up. Mere opposition finally blinds us to the good of the things we are trying to

> **save. And it divides us hopelessly from our opponents, who no doubt are caricaturing us while we are demonizing them. We lose, in short, the sense of shared humanity that would permit us to say even to our worst enemies, "We are working, after all, in your interest and your children's. Ours is a common effort for the common good. Come and join us."**

The new place we find ourselves in is perhaps not where we want to be, but it is a new place.

The Theological Task Force in the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church,

in Pam Byers' good words, "has offered us a precious opportunity to try to live together as if the gospel makes a difference."

By an overwhelming 91% plurality, the General Assembly invited the whole church to "engage in a process of intensive discernment through worship, community building, study, and collaborative work."

And with a 57% plurality — which any politician would be very happy to have and would use words like "landslide" and "mandate" to describe the GA passed a new Authoritative _____ about ordination decisions.

Some of our friends are very angry. A few have already decided they cannot remain in the family any longer: and

although I lament what with everything in me, I cannot help but wonder if there were any conditions in which they would be happy in a church that also has in it people like you and me. Other churches are exploring leaving and we will have to deal with property issues and what exactly holds this enterprise together. But my sense is that the vast majority of Presbyterians are ready to move forward and try to figure out how to live together.

And while that does not take us where I want my church to be and where I am confident it will one day be, it does give us an opportunity to live together in spite of our differences and for me, that is hopeful, maybe the most hopeful situation in a decade or so.

And along the way, people who disagree about ordination are talking to one another, some for the first time, and here and there, like the fragile new growth of springtime, people who disagree are stepping up and saying: "This should not divide us. We can live with our differences."

I am compelled by the New Testament's consistent celebration of our unity in Christ, haunted by Jesus' prayers for his disciples. It's there from the very beginning, as they sit around the table of the Last Supper, facing uncertainty, persecution, suffering, death itself — he's praying for their unity — "that they may all be one so that the world will know that you sent me."

It's there in the early church from the beginning, from the Council of Jerusalem and the first liberal-conservative fight and the first compromise in which neither side totally wins. And it's there in Corinth — a church that sounds s o much like our own, with affinity groups, and everybody picking up sides and rallying around conflicting agendas. Paul barely finishes the formal salutation before he launches into it in First Corinthians. "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you . . . For it has been reported that there are quarrels among you . . . Has Christ been divided?" It's almost as if

being the church means arguing, disagreeing and therefore needing the reminder that unity is at the heart of the enterprise.

"Lead a life worth," Paul — or whoever wrote Ephesians admonishes the church and then describes what that mew life looks like : it's a wonderful list, a heartbreakingly beautiful catalogue: humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the hand of peace."

I was intrigued by a piece Tom Gillespie wrote for *The Outlook*, "*Lines in the Sand."* Tom is the former President of Princeton Seminary. He has over the years voiced his opposition

to the aims of the Covenant Network, but his opposition has always been expressed respectfully, never dismissively. In his essay Tom said the goal of Peace, Unity, and Purity is like a Roman Troika, the chariot pulled by three horses. Only a very skillful driver can keep the horses pulling together. If they don't pull together, if one or the other decides to go its own way, disaster follows. "We have no peace" Tom said, "because our concern for purity is pulling against our commitment to unity."

Tom said we all resolve the conflict by privileging one of the threefold promises over the other two. And for him — <u>unity</u> has to trump the other two. He references, as support for his

position — Edward John Carnell, former President of Fuller Seminary and prominent conservative theologian. Carnell said, "The only theological justifiable reason for leaving any church would be its official denial of Jesus Christ."

For Tom Gillespie — the unity of the church — of diverse, disagreeing and disagreeable disciples of Jesus Christ is paramount.

I agree. And so my hope and I know not all will agree is that the Covenant Network of Presbyterians will not go our of business but will set aside its legislative agenda regarding G-60106b in order to support the General

Assembly's approval of the Peace, Unity, Purity Report:

- that we will resource and support a faithful examination process for candidates

- provide legal help as necessary

- that we will engage thoroughly in the discernment process, the building up of the body, and that we will reach across the aisle and over the boundaries and borders and walls — to our brothers and sisters in Christ, "bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit of the bond of peace."

Toward the Church God is calling us to be (or whatever my title is supposed to be!)

Maybe the best thing I was able to do for the Presbyterian Church as Moderator was to persuade Frederick Buechner to preach at the Syracuse Assembly. Buechner is one of us, a minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC (USA). But he doesn't pay much attention to denominational matters. He's an artist, an author and poet and he shouldn't spend time sitting in meetings. But he did agree to preach — and his sermon that morning in June of 1997 was for me. I was at the end of a year of daily conflict, every day engaging in the conflict, explaining the conflicts, pleading with people to stay with it. We had not talked about it, he and I. I frankly don't know how much he knew about what was transpiring in his

church nationally: a bit, I suspect, but not much. Someone accused me later of prompting him — and incredibly silly suggestion.

Buechner preached on the Word of Life — from I John 1: 1-4 where the author declares what he calls "the word of life — so that they — the early church — may have koininia and so that their joy may be complete.

He played a little but with koininia — and how we mostly translate it "fellowship" — as in drinking coffee out of paper cups after church on Sunday. "Fellowship Hour in 'Fellowship Hall.'" A better word for koininia, he said, is friendship and then told a story about

what he meant. It is a picture of the church I cannot forget.

Buechner and his wife were invited to "a Celebration of Love and Commitment," not a wedding because the couple in question was not a man and woman but two women, one of them a childhood friend of the Buechners' youngest daughter. They had known her since age 5, a pig-tailed, freckle-faced plump little thing who had grown up to be a warm-hearted woman, a great schoolteacher.

Buechner describes — so authentically his mixed feelings: how he admired them for standing up and declaring the truth about themselves in a small Vermont town that could not be

counted on for understanding and tolerance. He said he found it hard to believe that Jesus would do anything but bless a commitment that was honest and brave.

But he was also afraid for them, and with part of him wished that things had turned out differently, more conventionally — marriage, children, a safer, simpler future.

Some people didn't show for the ceremony. But a hundred or so did on the front lawn of one of the women's parents. There was the usual milling around and chatting. The minister read Ruth's words to Naomi, "Whither thou goest, I will go."

Buechner speculates that probably everyone present felt something different about what they were witnessing — but that everyone knew they were witnessing something "honest and loving and brave and that something kind and affirming and hopeful was happening inside ourselves and that grace, never more amazingly, was somehow in the very air we breathed."

And then this:

"for a few moments that summer afternoon, it seemed to me that we were what I believe church was created to be. We all of us hunger for church to be like that always. We hunger for God's grace to be as

palpable as it seemed to be in that offbeat little celebration in Vermont when, no matter what our misgivings — we were all of us truly friends in Christ there, and Christ was truly our friend and the friend as will of the two young women who were being blessed in his name."

"Love one another" the author of 1st John pleads. Be friends — at a level deeper than you are enemies or adversaries. Be friends — so that this broken world, divided, fractured, alienated, violent — might see something of a hopeful alternative: might see something even in us of God and God's love in Jesus Christ.